

## **STUCK IN THE SYSTEM? LACK OF PROGRESS IN ADULT BASIC EDUCATION**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of the study was to better understand reasons why some welfare recipients in adult basic education (ABE) programs do not appear to advance their skill levels and to identify strategies to help them make progress. A questionnaire was returned by 117 ABE teachers in welfare programs, who rated the frequency of occurrence of various reasons for their students' lack of progress. These reasons are complex and often related to life circumstances. Teachers described strategies they find effective to engage non-advancing students in learning and increase progress. Implications for practice and professional development are included.

### **Introduction**

Programs in ABE face unprecedented demands for assuring that the majority of adults who enroll make measurable progress. These demands are particularly evident in programs that provide education as part of a welfare reform initiative because time limitations increase the pressure on individuals and programs for demonstrating measurable progress toward academic goals. Despite the external pressure, not all who enroll make progress (Ziegler, Ebert, & Henry, 2002). Explanations for this lack of progress remain unclear. In order to provide effective programs, more needs to be known about non-advancing

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participants who remain largely invisible in a complex system of supports and services. The purpose of the study was to better understand the reasons why some welfare recipients in basic education programs do not appear to advance their skill levels and to identify strategies to help them progress.

## **Literature Review**

Research that examines lack of progress views it from two key perspectives, academic and socio-political. These perspectives show that reasons for lack of progress are complex and multidimensional.

### **Reasons for Non-Advancement: Academic Perspective**

Research has linked lack of achievement or progress to cognitive abilities and learning abilities (Poissant, 1994; Venezky, Sabatini, Brooks, & Carino, 1996). Venezky et al. (1996), based on experiences shared among adult literacy instructors and researchers, found that slow-progressing students had “either a history of special education classification or a hint of a learning disability” (p. 13). ABE progress is also tied to entry literacy level. Friedlander and Martinson (1996) found that, among welfare recipients identified as “in need of a basic education,” there were small or no educational gains for subgroups with low initial literacy levels. Pritchard and Yee (1989) noted that, from their experience of teaching low-literate adults, the probability of a non-literate adult attaining functional literacy correlates positively to the literacy level at which the individual entered the program.

### **Socio-political Perspective**

“A socio-economically deprived environment rife with sociological problems ... is almost the invariable feature of the early years of more than 90% of the students in our program” (Pritchard & Yee, 1989, p. 46). According to the National Institute for Literacy (1994), “events such as loss of housing..., family illness, unsafe housing conditions, domestic violence and neighborhood crime... often interfere with efforts to persist in adult literacy programs” (p. 5). Poissant (1994), in the rationale for his study of low-literate readers’ knowledge of their

cognitive skills, contended that the hardships inherent in poverty made educational achievement more difficult if not impossible. Loprest (2002) enumerated several forms of support that could help, including subsidized child care, health insurance, and help with food and housing expenses, which reduced the percentage of those who returned to welfare. While some welfare reform initiatives make these supports available, their provision is costly. Several studies (Carnevale & Desrochers, 1999; Friedlander & Martinson, 1996) questioned whether the gains some participants make are sufficient to justify the expenditures.

The reviewed literature shows that, although learning abilities play a role in a person's educational success, life circumstances usually associated with low socio-economic conditions may play an equally important role. A combination of low baseline literacy level, learning difficulties, and poverty can cause welfare recipients in ABE classes to progress slowly or not at all. What, then, are the strategies that research recommends for working with adults for whom educational achievement may be difficult?

### **Strategies for Assisting Adults with Low Achievement Levels**

In their studies of ABE students' educational progress, Sticht (1987), Mikulecky (1986), and Ziegler and Ebert (1999) found that, on average, a learning gain of one grade level can be expected after 100 hours of ABE instruction. Strategies for low achievers are mixed. While some recommended "more restricted program designs, with fixed sets of skills offered at specified times" (Venezky et al., 1996, p. 15), others condemned "the didactic approach called 'skills and drills'—which is likely to be least effective" (Grubb & Kalman, 1994, Abstract).

According to Friedlander and Martinson (1996), "determining . . . effective approaches for the least literate is the highest priority for future field research" (p. 335). Two major trends in the literature are: 1) relating instruction to the complexities of adult life; and 2) understanding that welfare legislation changed the focus of education to workforce preparation.

The theme of an entire issue of *Connections: A Journal of Adult Literacy* (Merson, 1995) was "The Learning Disabilities/Lack of Progress Issue." Contributors all concluded using an individualized program valuing individual strengths and multiple intelligences was the best approach. Comings, Reader, and Sum (2001) noted that increasing literacy levels for an adult whose initial basic reading skills are low "requires a teacher who is well trained and a student who has the motivation and time" (p. 20). They suggested that "more research should be used to develop and test effective program models" (p. 23). Martin (1999) addressed the changes to ABE brought by welfare reform and recommended a continuum of literacy approaches for different groups of welfare recipients that integrated literacy with both occupational skills and also social and organizational skills.

The literature reviewed suggests that non-advancement of adults in education is not unique to welfare recipients. We can hardly anticipate a discovery of a single universal reason for non-advancement and a corresponding strategy that will assure a break-through and future progress. The individualistic nature of the combination of factors contributing to adult learners' lack of progress means that strategies used to increase academic achievement may also need to be individualized, and that adult educators need multiple strategies to help adult learners make progress.

The purpose of this study was to better understand the reasons why some welfare recipients do not appear to advance their skill levels in ABE and to identify strategies to help this group of adults make progress. Three questions guided the research: 1) To what extent do welfare recipients not advance their skill levels in basic education classes across a southeastern state? 2) What are teachers' perceptions of the reasons why some participants do not advance? 3) What strategies do teachers use to help non-advancing individuals make progress?

### **Method**

Participants in the study were teachers in a southeastern state who taught at least one class comprised primarily of welfare recipients. Out of 142 teachers working with welfare recipients, 117 (82.4%) re-

sponded to the questionnaire that was part of this study. The majority (86%) of the responding teachers had been teaching for more than one year.

## **Instrument Development**

Two types of questions were developed for the questionnaire. Thirty quantifiable questions asked teachers to report the number of non-advancing students in their classes and to rate the frequency of occurrence (on a Likert-type scale) of reasons for lack of progress. The list of possible reasons was drawn from the literature, input from practitioners, and the professional judgment and experience of the researchers; teachers could add and rate other reasons. Seven open-ended, qualitative questions addressed strategies teachers used to help low-achieving participants make progress. A group of program supervisors and teachers provided feedback on the questionnaire before it was administered.

The definition of academic progress for this study was advancement of one grade level in both reading and math between administrations of the standardized Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE). The first step of the method was gauging the extent of non-advancement. Teachers were asked to consult their rolls and assessment records. Questions ascertained the length of time participants had been enrolled without progressing and established participants' initial placement level at enrollment. Data for quantifiable questions were entered into the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software that was used to analyze the statistical data. NVivo software was used to thematize the qualitative comments, after which they were ranked by the frequency of occurrence.

## **Findings**

### **Extent of the Problem**

Data were collected for the month of January 2003. Teachers were requested to count only those participants who had actually attended class at least once during that month and had been tested at least twice

during their ABE enrollment. Teachers reported 1,032 welfare recipients in their classes, 12 being the average number per class.

Out of 1032 students, 334 (32%) were determined by their teachers not to have made progress. Among these, 194 (19% of the total 1032) had not progressed after 6 or more months, and 103 (10% of the total 1032) had not progressed in a year or more. Out of 117 teachers, 26 (22%) said they did not have any non-advancing students in their classes. An additional 32 teachers (28%) said that they only had “short-term” non-advancing students (those who did not make progress during a 1-5 months time period). In other words, long-term lack of progress did not appear to be a problem for students of 50% of the survey respondents.

To determine the entry-level placement of the non-advancing students, teachers were asked to report how many non-advancing welfare recipients entered their programs at each of the four ABE levels (Table 1), according to the TABE assessment. The TABE provides grade equivalency in both reading and mathematics, and the lower of these two subject areas determines the placement level of the participant. The levels defined by welfare reform policy at the time<sup>1</sup> were used in the questionnaire for this study.

Table 1  
*Baseline ABE Levels of Non-Advancing Students*

Total	Levels			
	Level 1 (TABE grade equivalent of 0 – 2.9)	Level 2 (TABE 3 – 5.9)	Level 3 (TABE 6 – 8.9)	Level 4 (TABE 9 – 12.9)
334 (100%)	49 (15%)	173 (52%)	94 (28%)	18 (5%)

<sup>1</sup> Since the time of this study, placement changed from a four-level to a six-level placement/assessment system, based on standardized test scores.

Two thirds (67%) of non-advancing students entered the program at Level 2 or below. This percentage was slightly higher than the 63% of *all* welfare recipients (advancing and non-advancing) (Fox, Cunningham, Thacker, & Vickers, 2001) who entered at Level 2 or below. This difference, however, is not great enough to suggest that low entry levels contribute meaningfully to students' lack of progress.

## Reasons for Lack of Progress

Teachers were asked to rate the frequency of occurrence of suggested possible reasons for lack of progress among the group of welfare recipients on their current rosters whom they had identified as non-advancing. Teachers could add other reasons and rate those as well. These are summarized in Table 2.

When results were tallied, three additional categories had been suggested by two or more teachers: 1) "no motivation to study or work," 2) "physical problems," and 3) "found job."

Responses clustered in three categories by their frequency of being chosen as a reason: those reasons *most* frequently attributed by teachers for non-advancement of welfare recipients; the reasons *least* frequently attributed for non-advancement; and a *middle* group of reasons about which teacher attributions were split.

The first category included those reasons for non-advancement most strongly supported by teachers: "poor attendance" and "family issues." These two categories could partially overlap because family issues could be one of the reasons for poor attendance. The category of reasons with the least amount of support by teachers included "mental health/severe emotional problems," "substance abuse," and "intentionally scoring low on tests." The reasons falling in the middle category were "frequent non-compliance with regulations," "borderline intellectual functioning," "self-esteem issues," "learning disabilities," "lack of interest/involvement in ABE," and "poor test-taking skills."

Table 2

*Frequency of Reasons Selected for Non-advancement*

Reasons	Often	Sometimes	Seldom	Never	Don't Know
Poor attendance (excused or unexcused)	59 (51%)	24 (21%)	5 (04%)	6 (05%)	2 (02%)
Family issues	36 (31%)	32 (27%)	8 (07%)	3 (03%)	6 (05%)
Self-esteem issues	21 (18%)	36 (31%)	13 (11%)	7 (06%)	8 (07%)
Frequent non- compliance with regulations	20 (17%)	20 (17%)	8 (07%)	8 (07%)	13 (11%)
Poor test-taking skills	17 (15%)	39 (33%)	14 (12%)	4 (03%)	7 (06%)
Learning disabilities	16 (14%)	36 (31%)	11 (9%)	6 (05%)	15 (13%)
Borderline intellectual functioning	15 (13%)	34 (29%)	16 (14%)	8 (07%)	9 (08%)
Lack of interest/ involvement in ABE	10 (09%)	34 (29%)	16 (14%)	6 (05%)	6 (05%)
Mental health/ severe emotional problems	12 (10%)	20 (17%)	21 (18%)	13 (11%)	17 (15%)
Substance abuse	3 (03%)	22 (19%)	14 (12%)	12 (10%)	30 (21%)
Intentionally scoring low on tests	1 (01%)	23 (20%)	21 (18%)	15 (13%)	16 (14%)



*Qualitative summary of teachers' attributions of reasons for non-advancement.* Teachers were also given the opportunity to include any written comments about possible reasons for students' lack of progress. Of the 117 survey respondents, 79 (68%) included comments that were analyzed qualitatively with three major themes emerging.

The theme having the most comments involved students having reached a *learning plateau* or having achieved as much as they were able to achieve. Some teachers thought that many of the learners in this category might have the desire or motivation to succeed, but something was holding them back. Several teachers mentioned that the students about whom they were speaking probably would not be able to pass the GED test. They also suggested the possibility of learning disabilities, diagnosed or undiagnosed. Sometimes teachers noted that students, especially those who came into the program at lower levels were advancing, but very slowly.

A second theme involved *lack of motivation* on the part of welfare recipients related to academic progress. Typical comments included in this theme were about students not wanting or not having a strong will to advance; being content with their present situation; or intentionally scoring low on tests so as not to reach the 9<sup>th</sup> grade level, which would end their temporary exemption from welfare time limits and work requirements. As many as 72% of respondents saw "poor attendance" as the reason for non-advancement; however, not all instances of poor attendance could be ascribed to lack of motivation. A third theme that emerged is encapsulated as *life circumstances*. Teachers wrote about family or children's illnesses, lack of reliable transportation, pregnancy complications, lack of support from family members, domestic violence or other severe family troubles, childcare issues, housing, and children with problems.

Several teachers also mentioned that finding a job could cause participants to drop out for several months, and although many returned, most had to start over. Comments were also made about the inadequacy of the TABE for showing progress of those students who were advancing but slowly. Some of the comments involved students'

scores being inconsistent, or “bobbing up and down” from one testing to the next. The “poor test-taking skills” reason in the quantitative section would seem to be related to these comments.

### **Instructional Strategies**

The most commonly mentioned strategy was to give the non-advancing students individualized instruction in one of three forms: one-on-one tutoring or individual help, peer tutoring or working in pairs, and computer work on specific areas of student need. On the other hand, teachers frequently noted the advantages of group work as a way of reaching individual students through their peers: class discussions, cooperative learning, small groups working on a specific topic or problem with materials of multiple levels of difficulty.

Breaking content down into smaller steps so that successes could be celebrated more often was suggested. Extra practice, repetition, and “back to basics” were themes of several comments. Teachers’ recommendations for strengthening reading skills included reading to students, having students read aloud, and using concentrated phonics instruction. Frequent assessment followed by targeting instruction to the student’s specific weaknesses and learning level was also thought to be helpful. For students who seemed to have hit a learning plateau, some teachers recommended dropping back to a lower level of instruction so that the student could regain confidence.

Varying teaching styles and materials to accommodate multiple learning styles and/or to maintain interest was another suggestion. Some teachers specifically suggested working with students on “tips for learning” or on problem-solving strategies to help students learn how to learn. One teacher admonished, “Don’t forget the humor!”

## **Implications for Practice**

Findings have several key implications for practice. While the focus is on programs that offer educational services to individuals who receive welfare, the implications may also apply to programs serving a broader group of adult learners.

### **ABE Not a Viable Option for All Welfare Recipients**

The findings from this research suggest that participation in ABE may not be appropriate for a particular participant at a particular stage of life. Addressing some of these reasons, namely family issues and borderline intellectual functioning, requires collaboration between teachers and welfare agencies. It should be taken into consideration, however, that many participants at lower literacy levels are able to make progress and eventually become functionally literate and even pass the GED test, but it may take them a longer time.

### **Need for Professional Development of Teachers**

Teachers' comments about the strategies they use to deal with non-advancing learners mirror strategies that might be tried with any adult learner. Based on this observation, teachers may need professional development to widen their selection of specific tools to use with this population. Possible topics for professional development include strategies to improve attendance and retention, recognition of learning disabilities, analysis of poor reading skills, and addressing these with appropriate instruction, teaching methods that strengthen self-esteem, and problem-solving and test-taking skills. The importance of correct and accurate assessment must be recognized with a possibility for increased training in test administration.

### **Challenging Life Circumstances of Participants**

Although cognitive and learning abilities play a role, teachers' responses to the questionnaire seem to indicate that welfare recipients' life circumstances are among the primary barriers to their educational

achievement. Although dealing with such circumstances is traditionally seen as beyond a teacher's role, teachers believe it is important to acknowledge these barriers in order to create a mindset that is responsive to learning activities. To some degree, teachers teach "reading the world" as well as "reading the word."

### Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to better understand the reasons why some adults do not make progress in adult education programs. The findings support the literature in that reasons are complex and multidimensional. Yet, certain strategies may increase the likelihood that a greater percentage of participants can make progress. As this study was designed to focus specifically on teachers and teaching strategies, future research might look at non-advancement from the perspective of the participants.

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